

ROCK SOLID

A Novel By

Paul Slatter

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Chapter One

Paawan Gill woke to the early morning sun on his face, looked up through the camouflaged netting, and saw its first rays high in the morning sky lining the clouds with gold. He breathed in the fresh morning air blowing in untouched from the vast sea that lay before him as he floated. And as the unmistakeable smell of rubber hit his face from the small holes in the inner tube wrapped firmly around his chest, he stretched his lips, pulling at the tape that silenced his screams as the dark waters of the riptide swept him towards the beautiful inlets at the southern end of the Strait of Georgia.

Paawan held out his hands, fighting the current, and desperately trying to steer his body towards the security of land as a torrent of water pulled him further away from the sanctuary of the tree-lined shore and out towards the open ocean.

How he had ended up here, fighting for his life inside a rubber tire hidden away from any thin chance at salvation by cheap netting better used for hunting ducks, he didn't know. But here he was, frantically clinging to life, his turban gone, his black hair out in the open, the water splashing his face, its salt stinging his eyes, his feet wrapped in chains.

Only hours before, he'd been kissing her, her soft lips against his as she writhed beneath him, their tongues entwined—their silence beautiful after as they'd rested. He'd stroked her. marvelled at the softness of her skin. As he'd laid in the dark, he'd wondered how many years he'd been away, as though feeling all at once the time that had gone before—time he'd wasted and lost without her touch, time he could have spent loving her instead of living life on a razor's edge. Instead, he'd flown, he'd lived for the rushing air beneath his arms, swooping like a bird, fuelled only by courage as he tempted fate with the strange madness only a few men have it in them to do. But as he'd laid there with her in the darkness, listening to her breath, feeling her clasped hands wrapping his body, he'd known that those wasted years would soon be forgotten. She'd missed him as he'd missed her. She was his again, and this time, without a word, they both knew it was to be forever.

Charles Chuck Chendrill sat on the train and thought back to the Russian he'd found earlier in the

day and wondered if he could find a new matching plate set for the aging Englishman who liked to employ his services and paid well.

The Russian was gone, but he could still feel the burn on his stomach and the jarring of the train in his broken ribs as it pulled and pushed its way along the tracks, driven by binary code. *What a week it had been.* Now he just needed the plate set and he could go relax until someone else called worrying about something that would probably mean nothing in the grand scheme of things.

He leaned back and watched a group of Asian girls, who, from what Chendrill could tell by their shape, could only be dancers. The girls standing there giggling at the sight of a guy on a poster posing in his silver underpants. He smiled. He was getting to know that kid in the poster well now—and his mother even better. As crazy as he was, the kid was alright, a real character at least. He was the kind of guy who could steal your car and make you feel guilty for not asking him if he wanted to borrow it.

But that shit wouldn't last long with Chendrill. Once yeah, it had happened, but the second time the kid wouldn't just be back on the bus, which Chendrill had been making him take to preserve his normality, despite his unexpected fame. After all, he had been employed on full rate plus a Ferrari to keep an eye on the wonder kid, this up-and-coming international sensation who lived in the basement room at his mother's house. And so far, it had been well worth it.

Chendrill was a private investigator who once had been a cop and worked in the city he grew up in and loved. A guy with his own style who could make it happen, solve your problem, or simply tell you to go fuck yourself in his own Machiavellian way, should you be so deserving.

Pulling out his phone, he called Williams, the kid who showed promise as a police detective, but needed the years to fall behind him before anyone would take him seriously. Ditcon was there, Williams said, and so was the Russian, laying on the floor, and so were the press—outside on the sidewalk with Ditcon as he gave interviews and took the credit for having solved a case he never would have gotten close to had Chendrill not stepped away from his paid job babysitting the kid—who, once again, stood before him in a poster wearing silver undies that were certain to get these Asian dancing girls' minds whirling come bedtime—and put the puzzle together.

He got off the train at Granville Street and took a cab back to his apartment that overlooked the park and the people who frequented it. *Jesus my ribs hurt*, he thought. . . the guy with the baseball bat sneaking up on him like that just because Chendrill had been fucking his girl—even if she wasn't his girl any longer.

How long was this pain going to rip through him? From experience, it was at least five to six weeks of no sleep and staying away from people who made him laugh, but how was that possible when he worked for the most eccentric gay guys in town and was paid to look after a guy who had stolen their underpants?

It was going to be tough.

Tough, but not as tough as the last week had been when he'd nearly been burned alive for trying to fix something he knew the people in charge would let slip through the cracks. But as he lay down on his soft comfy bed and closed his eyes for a moment, knowing he still had to go find a matching plate set, little did he know that what had just occurred was nothing compared to what was coming.

About an hour later, he was woken up by the guy who kept food on the table and, at least for the moment, a Ferrari in the garage, and Chendrill told him straight, "If it's about the plate, then you need to give me time."

And as he lay there in pain, he heard Sebastian's worry nearly break the phone in his hand, "It's an emergency, Chuck. If it's not here at seven, I'll look like a fool."

And he would, there was no doubt about it, Chendrill thought, as he began to try and ease himself off the bed, having people over for dinner and someone having to sit there with an odd plate in front of them—my God!

Chendrill sat back up and walked to the bathroom—his abdomen still sore. Was it worth it, he thought, sticking his nose in like he had, chasing the Russian down and nearly being burned to death in the process? He had done it for the sake of his old friend Daltrey, so it had been—this was certain.

Chapter Two

Rann Singh stood in the bright and clean washrooms at the Surrey Center Mall, staring at himself while he fixed his purple turban in the long mirror above the sinks.

A purple turban, pink top, and brown shoes with no socks were the way to go. He'd got the call from the girl who worked as a cleaner and told her he'd pay her the \$500 she wanted for the photos, as long as they were the only ones.

"They are—I promise," she'd said. They'd agreed to meet and Rann had wondered who this girl with his phone number was.

He walked out into the mall and waited next to the coffee stall and looked around. *She could be anywhere*, he thought. Then he saw her through the crowd, looking at him, her body long and skinny, her hair bleached white showing her brown roots that, undoubtedly, some of the \$500 would go into repairing.

They sat down and sipped the coffees Rann had bought as she took the brown envelope from her bag and slipped it across the table to him. Opening it up, he sneaked a look inside, stared a moment, then said, "I know this guy."

"Yeah—he's rich, he sells condos downtown."

"Who's the girl?" Rann asked.

The girl with the bleached hair and white skin like an albino bunny shrugged and said, "She lived in this place I used to clean, I used to see her there sometimes. We all thought she was his mistress or something, but she's gone now."

Rann opened the package for a second look, then closed it again. The girl was beautiful, really hot, like some kind of supermodel. Then he said in his London accent, "What a fucking darling!"

"So, you going to pay me?"

Rann looked at the girl in the picture and then at what she was doing, and felt himself rising below. Looking up, he stared at the girl sitting before him. She wasn't too bad really—she had the pure white skin he liked, and she'd been looking at his turban quite a bit. Giving it a shot, he said, "Only if you let me see you again."

The girl with the skinny frame and the bleached hair shot him a look and smiled. She got asked out a lot, but this was the first time she had been asked out by an East Indian with a turban who spoke with a funny English accent.

"What makes you think you're my type?"

"Because you keep looking at my turban."

"I was wondering if my hair's longer than yours, that's all."

And cocking his head to the side, Rann Singh, from London, on the run from the Metropolitan Police, opened his wallet, peeled off the \$500 in cash, and handing it over with a cheeky smile said, "Well if you sleep with me, maybe you'll find out."

He took the envelope and let the contents fall out onto the kitchen table of his rented apartment on the outskirts of Whalley and took a better look at them. They were a little perverse, but he'd seen and dealt with worse—in the world of a blackmailer, one saw many things. He remembered the guy for sure now, the realtor who plasters his face on the back of almost every bus ploughing its way through town.

This could be a good one, he thought, *real good*. Anyone spending that much on self-promotion would do whatever it took not to have his reputation damaged in any way. Maybe he'd even thank him in the process—after all, almost everyone had a secret, especially this guy.

Rann Singh was a blackmailer through and through. It was almost all he'd ever done for the last ten of the twenty-eight years this world had been blessed with his presence. Born on the outskirts of London near Heathrow, the only son of Sikh parents, who as children in the seventies had been asked to leave Uganda by Idi Amin after the dictator woke one morning from a dream sent to him by God, or so he claimed, and had given all the Indians, who kept the country's economy stable, ninety days to leave.

With the money they'd smuggled out in magazines and books and inside their turbans, Rann's grandparents and his father—then twelve years old—resettled in Hounslow in the suburbs west of London, buying a small three bedroom home close to Heathrow Airport and sending Rann's father off with his hair wrapped up in a hanky on the top of his head to the local primary school to be teased and mocked and called a *Paki cunt* and *wog* along with all the other Indians from Uganda who'd arrived and were not Pakistani and had never been to India.

The days turned into weeks, then months, and the kids threw stones at his grandmother dressed in her sari as she waited patiently by the school's gate. Rann's grandfather took a job as a diesel mechanic at a Ford dealership as big as the one he'd owned in Entebbe less than a year before when Amin had stolen it from him along with his home.

By the time Rann was born, his grandfather, sick of suffering chronic racism for the second time in his life, said goodbye to his son and grandchild along with the rain and the grey skies of London, packed his bags for Uganda's more stable neighbor Kenya, and returned to the Africa he loved.

Settling into an unoccupied homestead ranch he'd found nestled securely at the foot of the Aberdare Mountains two hours north of Nairobi, he took to living alongside the arrogant and condescending white colonials residing in a country they claimed was their own, but who called him *choot* for wanting to do exactly the same.

And as the busy years passed in Hounslow on the outskirts of London with the same frequency as the lodgers who came and went from the small upstairs room Rann's father let out in the home under the flight path that Rann's grandfather had paid for with money he'd smuggled out from under a dictator's nose, Rann's father met his mother and, each with a doctorate in medicine, set up practice nearby.

Five years after Rann was born, he too headed off to school, as his father had, in his spotless blue crested blazer and shiny shoes to be called a *Paki cunt* for the first time in his life while his hanky covered hair, all neatly wrapped up in a bun, was pulled from the top of his head by the children of the men who had done the same to his parents—men who now lived on welfare with their ugly wives on the council housing estate nearby, who worked low-income jobs, and who would sometimes sit before Rann's parents in their new surgery, in their dirty shoes, on National Health Service coin, telling Rann's father their woes—usually depression, fuelled by self-inflicted obesity or alcoholism. These were men living in denial that they'd gone nowhere with their lives, struggling to face these dim facts as Rann's parents listened patiently, while their own kids, destined for the same, bullied their doctor's son at school. Spitting on him in the playground, bashing his bun, just as they had done themselves to the decent man they now came to seeking solace—though they didn't know it. “Go black home,” their children had shouted to Rann, adding the ‘L’ to ‘back’ in an ignorant attempt to validate their argument—even though he had been born in the same hospital as them, and was at home. These vile, dirty, feral children without guidance, with open sores and football boots for shoes, who would still smile and say hello when Rann would see them at his father's surgery when they were sick—when they were away from the gangs that were gradually becoming smaller as the neighborhood's ratios changed.

And then one day at the tender age of twelve, as Rann sat at the front of the class listening to every word, his mother and father headed to a hospital along the Great West Road and never came home. Rann waiting at the school gate at the end of the day and later in a neighbor's home as he watched them cry, wondering why he was being kept away from school until his grandfather and grandmother arrived from Africa to tell him the bad news of how they and his Sikh god Guru Nanak would be looking after him from now on, as his parents, sadly, were never coming back.

Within a year of his mother and father's death, Rann knew every inch of the ranch his grandfather had left to come and raise his grandson. “My ranch,” he'd say, unconsciously stroking his long grey beard as his turban wobbled, sitting there with his feet in sparkling, curly toed slippers up on a stool next to the blocked off fireplace.

“My ranch, I gave it up for you, Rann. Its roof was made of straw, and had a village for the help around the side. To the front was a view of the Aberdare Mountains, which rose up from the earth and pierced the blue of the heavens as the forest tried to climb its slopes, a forest deep and dense, full of wild animals. Its enormous trees started at the fields we owned, endless fields reaching all the way from the mountains to our ranch and the gardens where the women from the village bend over sweeping the grass clean with brooms made from fallen branches and strong twigs held together by twine.” Rann listened daily, wondering if the smell of his grandmother’s spices would ever leave his clothes and skin, and how he could get out of helping his grandfather paint the house a different shade of purple, feeling guilty, as if it was his own fault his parents were gone and his grandfather had sold his ranch and left Kenya, letting the home he loved with its view of the mountains and its women who swept the lawn go, under value, to a South African whose name, Malcolm Blou, was now a curse word in the small three bedroomed, strangely painted house under the flight path to Heathrow.

By the time he’d left school, Rann had blacked out with rage four times and blackmailed three people. The first was at the age of eleven, when he and a friend hit up his brother for smoking. Then, a year after his parents’ car crash, the pair had followed their religious education teacher into the school’s carpark and asked the man if he could help them, as they’d found porn stashed away in amongst the Bibles in the teacher’s cupboard and were both in need of a new bicycle. After six months had passed, Rann’s grandfather began to wonder why he had not returned the new bicycle he had said he’d borrowed from a friend, and asked him about it. As Rann sat crying, confessing all, and worrying he’d lose his Raleigh 10 speed, he’d heard his grandfather say, “It is okay Rann—you were helping this man, you were sent on a course from God to save him.”

And the truth was, he had saved him—saved his job, saved his marriage, saved his life.

“You have saved him because the man has changed his ways,” Rann’s grandfather had carried on saying, “and he has paid you for this, just as the priest himself would be paid for helping and saving a man’s soul.”

The third came just as he was about to set foot out into the wide world looking to put his life and soul into something to gain some sense of fulfilment from his own hard work, and what he found came easily to him. It was simple—for every ten hardworking family men doing what they could in life to better themselves within the ever growing Indian and Pakistani communities, where benefit fraud was already rife, there was always one who was really trying to beat the system.

He'd answered the door one morning to a slightly officious government employee who was looking for the whereabouts of the man who rented the spare room upstairs, but never slept there. The strange man only ever showed up once a week, usually on Fridays, wearing what Rann thought looked like pajamas. And, waiting for the occasional plane to pass, Rann answered the government employee’s questions as honestly as possible.

Yes, he knew this man. Yes, he lived here. Yes, he rented the small room upstairs. “No, you can't see the room, it's not my place to show you, sorry sir. No, the gentleman is not working, but I know he is looking for work every day. He is a good man, a God-fearing man.”

And on and on he went.

On the following Friday when the man's check arrived, popping through the door all the way from the department of social services, Rann opened it to see he was receiving 200 pounds a week and a quick calculation told him the gentleman had pulled in over 10,000 from this address alone. When the man arrived that afternoon to get his post and pretended to pray, he'd found the check in the envelope gone and the benefit fraud officer's card in its place along with a note, which simply read,

God has called upon me to help you. He fears you will end up in prison. Please send me 2000 pounds upfront and then 100 a week from then on so as I can continue to carry out work for Him within our community.

All proceeds were to be delivered to a Post office account.

And the man had paid, but not with the 2000 pounds or the 100 a week thereafter. He'd paid by giving the details of ten other fraud players working the system—with a one-thousand-pound sweetener on top.

Of these, two paid, two disappeared, and a fifth had a visit from the government fraud officer as a warning to the other five who were dragging their heels.

And that's how it all started for Rann Singh, the kid destined to follow in his parents' footsteps and become a doctor, until one fateful day his life was changed by a man asleep at the wheel, waking from a dream—just as his Ugandan-Indian parents' lives had been changed when their destiny was turned upside down by a ruthless dictator who, asleep at the wheel of his nation, woke up from a dream.

Taking his beloved grandfather's misguided advice, Rann found his own path in this world and set out upon it, slowly learning a trade which fed off people's fears and indiscretions, with little care for the hurt and suffering his actions caused the people caught in his web—and who, usually, were no worse than him—because in his grandfather's eyes, and so his too, he was helping them on their path to salvation.

Chapter Three

Patrick De'Sendro, voted the most reliable realtor in Vancouver for the fifth year running by a committee he owned and operated himself, slipped his cock back into his pants and put down the telescope, listening to the man with the London accent speaking quietly into the phone. He had been waiting with baited breath all day for a call to come in from Hong Kong about the decision on a penthouse condo. He'd also been waiting all day for the blonde across the way to come home and strip down like she did every evening before she took a shower. And when she had and he'd pulled it out, the phone had rung—typical. The call hadn't been from overseas, but the guy on the other end clearly was, though he hadn't said the words Patrick had been expecting.

"Patrick? I'm sorry to disturb you, but are you the guy on the back of the bus, the realtor?"

Still holding his crotch, Patrick answered, "Yes, I'm here to make your dreams come true, thanks for calling—how can I help?"

Then there was silence, long and embarrassing, and as Patrick was about to ask if the man with the London accent was still there, he heard him say, "I'm glad it's you, you see, because I've just discovered something that someone was going to do to you that I think may have hurt you and your business."

And hearing these words, Patrick's heart skipped a beat as he felt the sudden rise in temperature envelope his body, sending instantaneous beads of sweat to the crown of his head. He stayed silent, his brain whirling away as a host of unscrupulous real estate deals came back to life in his head. Then the man said, "There is a girl who has found photos of you and I've managed to stop her handing them over to a friend who's in your line off work. You see, for some reason, and I don't know why, she doesn't like you."

Oh my God, Patrick thought, it had to be the photos Alla had of him, the ones she used to like to tease him with after he'd been watching her making love to some stranger through his telescope, the ones she used to let him see, holding them in her hand as she stood dressed in sexy underwear in front of the full-length window of her luxury condo opposite his.

What was going to happen if any of the people he knew found out? What would he do? How could he sit down again in a corporate boardroom and broker a deal for a condo complex again? The silence he would receive as he walked into a room or an open house full of piranhas would be deafening, so he said, "We don't need that."

'We'—he was bringing the guy into it now, he thought, making it like they both had a problem. The guy with the London accent replied, "No, *we* don't. It's the reason I'm calling. I've heard through the grapevine that you're a great guy. You sold a property to one of my friends some time back and did 'im' a right favor on the deal. This is why I'm calling; I think I know a way I can stop her."

A right favor? Patrick thought, looking to the window of the apartment across the way, the girl there again, faint in the distance with her blonde hair, but the erection Patrick had had in his pants now completely gone and forgotten.

There was a couple of Brits he'd sold a place to some while back and saved them a fortune in the deal—or so they'd thought—they spoke like this guy, clipping their sentences and throwing in words he couldn't comprehend. He hadn't liked them, the way they'd treated him like a parasite, acting as though he should be giving them the commission and working for free. So, he said, "Yes, I remember Michael and his lovely wife. They're a fantastic couple—special people. Please give them my best and tell them to give me a call."

And knowing there was no chance he'd ever meet them, Rann said, "I will, you're right, they're a great couple. But sadly the girl who's got the photos, she's not so nice. It's why I'm calling."

Patrick took a deep breath. He had to get Chendrill on this quickly, he thought, knowing the photos were out there now that Daltrey was sadly no longer around to keep them safe. Then he said, "I have a private investigator looking for them—I'm glad you called, I'll get him to pop over and see you."

Then there was silence. And the Brit said, "Yeah—but it's best we don't involve a third party or the girl. . . she'll get pissed and give those photos of you to her mate, just like that, she won't give a shit, she'll just do it. See, she said to me, she don't like you for some reason, said your teeth are too big—that's how nasty she can be. I said, no he's alright, he saved Michael and his missus a fortune."

Then Patrick said the words Rann had been waiting to hear, "Just tell her I'll make it worth her while if she just gives them back."

And Rann knew he had him right where he wanted him to be.

Chendrill watched Patrick cut his lemon poppy loaf into sections and pop them into his mouth. His ribs were still hurting, sending unexpected electric shocks through his torso every time he moved or tried not to laugh, but Patrick was funny, especially now as he attempted to appear coy and innocent as he said to him a second time, "Why can't people just be nice and honest?"

Because they aren't, Chendrill thought. If the world were like that he'd be out of a job, and he wondered how nice and honest Patrick was when he was selling a property. So, he said, "Everyone wants a little bit more than they can get—you know this. You've pushed the odd deal to keep commissions high I'm sure."

Patrick placed another piece of cake in his mouth and looked outside to the forty-foot poster of some naked kid stuck in an elevator with a broken nose, and, completely lying, said, "Trust me, I never have—and besides, I never actually said I'd pay this guy anything."

Chendrill stayed quiet on that one. From what he could tell, he had in a roundabout way, but getting into it with him was not worth the effort. As he looked again at Dan in the poster, Patrick said, "Strange thing was it sounded to me as if the guy was trying to do me a favor."

They always did, thought Chendrill—blackmailers were like that, never actually admitting they were doing anything wrong at all, just trying to help out.

"Yeah, they're good at that, these types of people. But don't be fooled—this fuck, whoever he is, he's still trying to put one over on you—even if he seems as though he's on your side."

"Maybe he is though; he said I'd helped his friend Michael."

Chendrill frowned and took a swig of his coffee, then laughed, and held his side. "Fuck me Patrick, you need to let it go that this guy is a saint and knows your friends—he doesn't, he just adlibbed it all once you started talking. That's what these shitheads do. Has he mentioned a dollar figure?"

Patrick shook his head.

"Well he will and as you're a rich man, you can expect it to be big."

"How big?"

"Bigger than the cost of one of your ads on the back of a bus big."

Then Patrick took a deep breath and said, "Fuck me, I don't care how much. I just want this mess gone."

And hearing this, Chendrill leaned in and said, "And the moment you start paying, it's never going to be."

Patrick took a deep breath and let it out and stared at a group of Asian girls sitting together taking up space with their computers, then he said, "What is it with these girls in this town? Why do they have to go fucking with me?"

Chendrill didn't answer, couldn't be bothered. The chances were slim to none that there was even a girl involved, though one had definitely instigated it all by taking the photos—but she wasn't likely to be doing that again anytime soon.

Then Patrick looked up at him and asked, "I read in the paper that some guy was found dead downtown. Was that the guy I saw?"

Chendrill nodded, it was exactly the same guy Patrick had seen stalking his friend and Chendrill's old flame from way back just before he'd gone all medieval on her.

"And were you involved, Chuck?"

Chendrill sat there, staring at the table as he remembered seeing the man on the floor. "No, someone got there before me. "

Chendrill left Patrick to worry about his reputation in the coffee shop and walked back through Yaletown. He turned another corner in the old warehouse shipping area turned chic and trendy with yuppie boutiques and loaded with fast cars and restaurants. He stepped through the doorway of the offices for Slave Media nestled in amongst it all. The pretty girl at reception smiled, telling him he looked good today and that Sebastian was waiting in the boardroom.

"Where have you been?" asked Sebastian as Chendrill opened the door and stepped inside. "I've been trying to reach Dan, but he's not answering his phone."

Chendrill sat down at the table opposite and smiled.

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you?"

Sebastian looked back at him shocked; that was the last thing he was expecting to hear.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you've plastered photos of him naked in a pair of some gay guy's silver undies all across town and now he can't go out."

"No one knows they're Mazzi's."

"He does."

"Well he was all cool when he was wearing them at the time."

And Dan had been cool—cool enough to steal the keys to Mazzi's apartment, cool enough to wear his clothes, cool enough to drive his Ferrari, but not cool any longer since Mazzi had caught him and broken his nose with his man purse then taken photos, paying him handsomely for it instead of having him thrown in jail.

Sebastian said, "He'll come around, but you need to keep an eye on him."

"I am, he's at home."

"Please tell him he's getting some great press."

"I don't think he gives a shit, Sebastian."

Confused now, Sebastian looked back at him and picked up the dog Chendrill had once saved for a cool \$10,000 by simply going to the pound.

"He's not mad at us?"

Chendrill shook his head, "No, I'm just playing with you. Like I said he couldn't care less.

All he wants to do is sit in his room."

"And do what?"

"You can work that one out."

Then Sebastian said thinking, "Oh? Well can you go around and tell him from me that he's just terrific, please?"

"That's it? You called me in to ask me that?"

"Yes, and to ask what's happened to Mazzi's Ferrari?"

This one threw Chendrill. He wasn't expecting them to know that the company car they gave him had been towed and was sitting in a tow company's lot, with Chendrill refusing to pay the fee. So, he said, "Some fat prick who uses his neck as a pillow has it."

"I know. They called here and asked me to come down. Told me I'd stolen it the last time they had it and now they want double. They said if I don't come down and pay, they're going to send it off to their friend's place on the river at Annacis Island to get it crushed."

Chendrill smiled. The cheeky fuckers had towed the Ferrari Sebastian let him use before and Chendrill had gone straight over to the yard and stolen it back. Now they had it again and were flexing some muscle with empty threats. Still smiling, he said, "They're going to crush a Ferrari—same as they would a twenty-year-old piece of shit Chevy?"

"That's what they're saying, Chuck!"

"Don't worry, it's bullshit; they haven't got the guts," Chendrill said, but he knew different. These guys wanted to be Hells Angels, but didn't have the smarts to become one—or the guts to chance getting themselves killed if they were. But they could crush a Ferrari and get away with it. All they had to do was crush it, take photos, then report it stolen—it was the way they were and the kind of thing they'd do so they could brag about it to their friends whilst they drank beer and mouthed off about their wives. He needed to get it back, Chendrill thought, but they could go fuck themselves if they thought he was going to be paying anything, let alone double.

Chapter Four

Rann Singh adjusted his turban as he sat in the booth of a franchise restaurant where wannabe supermodels worked as waitresses. Today's was blue—blue like the ocean, he'd been told when he'd bought it from the store in Southall on the outskirts of London. Buying it there in the store that smelled like his grandfather's home the day before he'd been chased out of town by the cops for killing the guy with the big mouth. Rann losing his temper and blacking out like he did, just as he had the first time it had happened, when the shithead kids at his school had smacked his bun as they sang out a little rhyme that referenced his parents, who wouldn't be coming home, 'Two down—fifty thousand to go. You'll be next, you Paki cunt Joe.'

But that time he hadn't won and had woken up on the floor with knuckles bleeding and his blazer ripped, his head covered in lumps from their fists and feet.

The food was not bad for a franchise place. The girl was in the toilet, no doubt preening her bleached white hair that he liked so much on tall skinny white women. She was feeling horny she'd told him, as she giggled down the phone, and said she'd been thinking about what he'd said about letting her see his hair—then admitted it was because she'd kept seeing these pictures of a really hot guy naked all-around town. She needed to make her mind up, not that it mattered.

What he'd do, he thought, was have the meal and take her straight back to his place, tell her he had to get up early for an appointment or something. Then he'd take her to his bed and go into the bathroom and pull his turban off, let his hair down so it would fall in her face as he was fucking her, let her swim in it. Girls loved that.

Then he'd kick her out and call Patrick again, let him know he was going to have to pay big to keep his secret safe, or there were going to be a different set of photos of him displayed on the back of every other bus in town.

But the girl had been a while, and knowing girls who were about to get laid generally did take awhile, he pulled out the untraceable phone he kept in his inside pocket and dialed. And as soon as Patrick answered in his usual joyous tone, Rann simply said, "I've managed to sort it all out Patrick, don't worry. The girl said you could have the photos back and she's going to forget about everything. All she wants is the commission you got from the penthouse suite you sold last month; that's it, problem solved."

Rann waited for a moment and cut into his peppercorn steak, which was a little overdone, and looked up at the TV to the ice hockey—the Canadian guys at the bar staring at it as though it was Rann's Sikh god Guru Nanak himself. Then he heard Patrick say, "You know how much that is? Does she know she could go to prison? Besides I know you think I'm rich, but I really can't afford that kind of money!"

Cool as a cucumber, Rann quoted straight off one of Patrick's ads he'd seen on the way in,

saying, "You can't afford not to," and sat there listening to the silence on the end of the phone. Then Rann continued saying, "I don't think she's thought it through Patrick, you know, about her getting prison time. But you should consider if things were to go too far and she starts handing out the photos, then everything comes out in the wash. And even if we can keep a lid on it and no one ever sees the photos, then rumours can start and rumours as you know tend to be worse than the real thing—but anyway, if you're not interested, I'll tell her. Like I said, I'm just doing you a favor because you helped Michael out."

He looked around the skinny white chick coming now from the toilet looking good, the guys at the bar giving her the stare, her hair preened, the layered black roots all gone.

Then he said, "Don't worry then, I'll let her know you're not interested—I'll pass your message on. Thanks."

And for once in his life, before Patrick could get the last word in, Rann hung up.

It wasn't until the next day that he called again—the girl with the bleached hair gone now from his bed. She had bathed in his long thick locks as he let his hair drop down onto her face and breasts whilst he fucked her hard, and she'd screamed noisily and held onto the sheets with her right hand, not letting go as he'd thrown her around the bed. And when he'd finished, all she wanted to know was which type of shampoo and conditioner he was using, and as she opened the door to leave, he said, "Come back again when you're ready and I'll tell you."

He gave it until four in the afternoon and with his feet up on a stool, he called Patrick again. "Patrick, it's me, you got me in trouble—I told the girl I'd been talking to you and you wanted to make a deal and she flipped. She's really upset."

Patrick stayed silent on the other end of the phone and then, trying to sound cool, he said, "Is this supposed to make me feel bad for her? After all, she is trying to blackmail me, let's be honest here—how do I know if there is even 'a girl'? You're probably the only one involved and you haven't even told me your name. All I know is that you're from London, so that narrows it down a bit if I decided to go to the police."

"I think you've got it wrong with me, Patrick my old mate, you see. The only thing I want out of this whole thing is the name and phone number of the girl doing that stuff to you in the photos."

It wasn't that he personally wanted to be sodomised by her, as pretty as she was, but he'd definitely like to fuck her, that was for certain, get her sweet lips wrapped around his dick and see if she could take it all the way down. The thing was, the girl was a true pro. He could see that, the way she was working this realtor's ass and staring into the camera at the same time, and

the question was how many other people did she have photos of, others who also had their little secrets, others who's lives he could turn around and save. That was the key.

"I don't know who she is," lied Patrick, as he thought about how, in fact, he knew who she was and where she was right now, laid up in a hospital with a spinal injury. He heard Rann say straight back to him, "You telling me you let a stranger do that to you?"

Patrick stayed silent now on the other end of the phone. He'd done worse. He said, "What I do in my private life has nothing to do with you."

"You're right," Rann answered straight back down the phone, "I don't care, you could have a camel in the room with you. The thing is, you need to start caring, caring about the photos being out there and getting into the hands of the people who do care and also love and trust you."

Then having enough of it all and without taking into consideration any of the advice he'd paid Charles Chuck Chendrill for, Patrick said it again, "Why don't you just tell this girl—person, I'll make it worth their while to give me all the photos, but I think \$250,000 is a little steep."

Chapter Five

They settled at \$100,000 for the photos and Rann was happy with that.

Well worth it, he thought, as he took the sky train the next day, riding it for a while until he knew everyone on board with him as it completed its circuit over and over, then just as it was getting busy, he placed his white headphones under his black turban and made the call.

His instructions for Patrick had been simple, all the realtor had to do was wait at the bottom of the Main Street station with the money in a black sports bag and not get mugged, then Rann would let him know what the girl wanted him to do.

And now all Patrick had to do was get on a train.

"Well which train?" Patrick had asked in a fluster, "and what about my car?"

"Leave the car, let it get towed," Rann had replied, his voice not giving any chance of an alternative. Then he said carrying on, "Go up to platform two and get onto the next train heading east right now."

And as the train pulled into the station, Rann saw him standing there looking like a million dollars groomed and manicured in his Italian loafers.

Patrick stepped onto the train and took a seat. *Where the fuck was this idiot?* Wasting his day with all the cloak and dagger shit when they could have just as easily met in a coffee shop, he thought. He looked around the carriage which was full, Chinese students, two punks, old, young, a guy in a black turban at the other end probably listening to some Bollywood music like they liked to, and that guy in his underpants again, staring back at him like he wanted to fight. *BlueBoy condoms*, Patrick thought, it had been a while since he'd used one. His old girlfriend, the Russian, the one he was in love with still, used to let him ride bareback; said she liked the feel of him inside her, said she liked to feel him come then feel it seep out throughout the day, letting her know a part of him was still with her, because she loved him.

The train carried on, heading out to Surrey into the suburbs, people coming, people going. *Fuck me*, Patrick thought, staring at his watch, he could have sold a condo in the time this was taking up, not that he would have, but he could.

He stared out the window, the place now getting industrial, suburban, passing town houses and gardens and people who weren't rich like him and could never afford to pay this kind of cash to keep some loser's mouth shut.

Then his phone rang and heard the guy from London say, "Go stand by the end door. At the next stop, step off the train, place the bag on the bench that has your picture on it, and then step back onto the train and go home."

Patrick was startled. What was this guy going on about? He didn't know he had an advert running out this far on the sky train. No wonder this idiot knew who he was—fuck me, he was going to get it taken down first thing tomorrow.

The blackmailer was on here with him in amongst the rest, ready to get off in a mass exodus, the only station on the line where you could switch trains. This guy was good, Patrick thought, he'd give him that, choosing this station when he could have used any one of them along the way to make the switch.

He made his way to the end door and stood there waiting, the Indian in the turban there with him along the way staring at the guy in the poster along with a group of students.

Then as the train came into the station, he saw himself in the distance, smiling back on the bench, looking like a fool with his teeth all shiny, and wearing a sweater shaped with triangles that had absolutely zero attitude or sex appeal—not like the kid in the poster had in his shiny underpants, selling condoms.

On cue, the train stopped right opposite the bench as the guy from London said it would, and the doors opened, the Indian stepping off first and walking away towards the exit, the girls still giggling, staying on the train, pointing and laughing now at Patrick's picture. Patrick stepped off, took a deep breath, and placed the bag calmly next to the photo of himself and walked back, stepping onto the train just as the doors closed.

Rann Singh kept walking and did not stop until the train was safely out of sight and around the corner heading east.

Stopping, he turned, heading back towards the bag, cutting his way through the other passengers like a knife. Reaching it, he picked it up and headed quickly along the platform and down the stairs. He walked under the tracks and, following a big guy in a black camo-like Hawaiian shirt and jeans, climbed up the stairs to the platform on the other side.

The train heading west would be there soon; having studied the system he knew it was impossible for Patrick to switch trains at the next stop and come back. He reached the middle of the platform and waited, the bag heavy on his shoulder, the money in used tens and twenties like he always asked for. He looked to the rails below him as they began to sing as the metal shifted with the weight of the approaching train. Then he looked up, Patrick's photo there on the bench across the tracks, smiling back at him with his slogan right below saying, *'You can't afford not*

to.'

And then the train pulled into the station, cutting the connection. The doors slammed open, Rann stepped onto the train and sat down, placing the bag on his knees and looking discreetly to the train's occupants around him, just as they did with him and his big turban.

Slowly, he looked back to the bag, opened it, and snuck a look inside—the bills all wrapped in cloth as he had asked, bound with string and a note sitting on top. Reaching in, he pulled it out, opened it, and read 'Now I know who you are and you've got problems—Charles Chuck Chendrilla.'

Chapter Six

Charles Chuck Chendrill watched from the corner of his eye as the guy with the turban looked about the train to see who was watching him. He'd not been easy to spot the first time around as Chendrill had kept an eye on Patrick through the center doorway that linked the train's carriages. It was a good job the East Indian had put together. The drop could have been anywhere and having Patrick drop it off to himself on the station's bench had been an especially nice touch.

The guy was shitting himself now as he dug further into the bag, finding the money was just photocopied cut paper. Lifting his head again, the East Indian in the turban looked around as though he didn't care, Chendrill wanting to go over and sit next to him and say, 'Looks like you're the one taking it from behind now,' then arrest him. But he was no longer a cop, so he just watched and waited until the guy in the turban got off still carrying the bag slung across his shoulder, standing there outside the train looking back and forth along the empty platform as the doors shut behind him, and watching as the train pulled away. Chendrill sitting there lost in his own world, staring out the other window as the carriage moved past the Sikh in his turban carrying \$100,000 dollars worth of nothing and a note that told him he was in trouble. And he was.

End of sample chapters

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